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SUBJECT: Uzbekistan: UNICEF Brainstorming Session on Child Labor:
Going Beyond Demands for Assessment

CLASSIFIED BY: Holly Lindquist Thomas, Pol/Econ Officer, State,
Tashkent; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On October 8, UNICEF hosted a brainstorming session for members of the international community to discuss the issue of child labor in the cotton sector. Although the failure of Uzbekistan to invite the International Labor Organization (ILO) to do an assessment this year was a significant setback, there are several ways to move forward. Participants agreed that in order for any approach to be effective, it must be done in the spirit of working with the government of Uzbekistan in taking concrete measures to address child labor. There was also agreement that efforts to isolate or shame the GOU would be counterproductive. End summary.

Root Causes

¶2. (U) Representatives from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, UNDP, and the French, British, German, and American Embassies met on October 8 to discuss next steps in dealing with the problem of child labor in Uzbekistan.

¶3. (U) Participants agreed that at the root of the child labor problem is the quota system, whereby the GOU requires farmers to deliver a certain quantity of cotton, to be sold at a set price. The quota is set by the regional authorities, who specify production right down to the plot level. Farmers who do not reach the quota may lose their land or end up heavily indebted to the government, which pays an annual advance on payments so that farmers can buy the inputs necessary to plant and harvest the crop.

¶4. (U) Farmers prefer to use adult laborers. They are more productive, and they do not have to be provided with food and lodging. At the height of the harvest, however, sufficient adult labor is not always available, and the farmers turn to children. This is less of a problem on productive land than it is on marginal

land, where farmers need to harvest every last ounce of cotton in order to meet the quota. Tailoring the quota to better reflect land productivity would help to relieve some of this pressure.

¶5. (U) The GOU wishes to keep its overall production of cotton consistent, as it takes much pride in being the third leading exporter of cotton worldwide. Nevertheless, it diverted about 750,000 hectares last year to wheat production, both because the land was marginal and in light of food security concerns. Thus, while the GOU may not be inclined to significantly lower the quota in the short-term, a gradual step-down approach may be possible.

Where the Money Goes

¶6. (SBU) There are three major beneficiaries of cotton revenues: 1) the state budget (15-17% of the budget is derived from cotton revenues); 2) the cotton manufacturers; and 3) individual oligarchs, some of whom likely have strong ties to President Karimov. Loup Brefort, Director of the World Bank, stated that when cotton accounted for a much bigger proportion of state revenue (60% as opposed to 10-15%), it was impossible to discuss any change in the cotton sector. Dialogue on the issue now is a possibility.

TASHKENT 00001549 002 OF 005

GOU Steps to Address the Problem

¶7. (U) Good laws are in place in Uzbekistan that could help to ensure that children are not being used in the cotton harvest. The GOU last year ratified ILO Conventions 138 on the Minimum Age for Employment and 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor. The GOU also developed a National Action Plan last year to address child labor, and sent letters to all regional departments that they should not use child labor.

¶8. (U) This year, the GOU added cotton picking to a list of hazardous work, from which children are excluded. The problem lies in implementing the international and domestic legislation. On October 9, MFA officials informed poloff that 150 local administrators were reprimanded for allowing the use of child labor last year, and Trade Minister Ganiev recently stated in Washington that a few local hokims recently were replaced because they were allowing child labor to be used in their districts.

¶9. (U) The Ministry of Labor trained about 200 personnel to address child labor issues this summer, with the stated goal of monitoring the cotton harvest and reporting on child labor problems. UNICEF reported, however, that the role of these labor inspectors has been to fulfill administrative regulations, and they are not actually monitoring the fields.

¶10. (SBU) The GOU entered into an agreement with the World Bank this year, under which the World Bank will provide financing for farmers who certify that they have not used child labor. While not directly addressing the child labor problem, this arrangement allows for some kind of monitoring to determine whether farmers are meeting their commitments under the agreement. (Note: Loup Brefort, Country Manager for the World Bank, encouraged finding "entry points" like this to engage on child labor in an objective, non-judgmental manner. End note.)

Reports on the 2009 Harvest

¶11. (SBU) UNICEF observations and press reports have noted school children working in the fields in eight of 14 regions: Tashkent; Syrdarya; Kashkadarya; Samarkand, Karakalpakstan, Xorazm, Surhandarya, and Bukhara. In rural areas, children as young as 10 years old are reportedly working in the fields, whereas in other regions, the youngest children are 14-15 years old. The regional hokim (governor) in the Ferghana region, one of the largest producing regions in the country, has publicly called on local authorities not to use child labor (including university students) this year.

¶12. (SBU) Government employees are being mobilized in greater numbers this year. In the past, teachers have worked the fields and acted as supervisors for the children. This year, local officials, doctors, and even police officers have been observed working in the fields. As a result, public services have been

TASHKENT 00001549 003 OF 005

reduced and development projects suspended. The private sector is also being called upon to do its part. (Note: One American businessman reported to econoff that he was told that several of his workers were needed to harvest the fields. In order to keep his own business up and running, he hired day laborers to take their place, and has had to pay these laborers over and above the governmental rate to entice them to do the work. End note.)

¶13. (U) The GOU is offering new incentives to adults working the fields this year. For example, in some regions it has been announced that the individual who picks the most cotton will be given a car at the close of the harvest. As a result, adults from either the public or private sectors are engaging their family members to help them increase the volume of cotton they deliver.

¶14. (U) The press and some observers have reported that parents this year are being asked to sign statements that they retain responsibility for their children while they are working in the cotton fields. While some parents have refused to sign, the press reports that most feel they have no choice.

The Way Forward

¶15. (U) Participants agreed that the industry and NGO- led boycott has not been effective in addressing child labor. There are other avenues to pursue, however. Participants advocated a multi-vector approach, encouraging the GOU to move forward in the following areas:

¶16. (U) Diversification: The World Bank is encouraging more diversification away from marginal land, and suggests that doing so could greatly decrease the number of children working in the fields. Estimates show that as much as one quarter to one third of cotton is grown on marginal land.

¶17. (U) Cost Benefit Analysis: The World Bank and UNICEF have been encouraging the government to do a cost-benefit analysis of

child labor, taking into account the costs of lost education, as well as the short- and long-term effects of children working in the fields. Presenting this as economic problem with economic solutions provides the GOU an opportunity to engage on this issue without having to defend the morality of using a child work force.

¶18. (U) Mechanization: There is some debate over the role mechanization can play in addressing child labor. The labor force here is abundant and much cheaper than the purchase and upkeep of equipment, and therefore more attractive to farmers. Also, there is a belief that handpicked cotton results in higher quality lint, which fetches a higher price on the world market. The World Bank recently signed an agreement to provide financing to farmers, but it is too soon to know whether individual farmers will use the loans to buy cotton harvesters, or in other ways that may be seen as more cost-effective. Nevertheless, mechanization is part of a long-term solution, and should be encouraged. (Note: During A/S

TASHKENT 00001549 004 OF 005

Blake's recent visit, the local governor (hokim) of Samarkand told him that the Samarkand region could use more than double the number of cotton harvesters currently in the fields. End note.)

¶19. (U) Implementation of Existing Commitments and Development of Domestic Legislation: ILO Conventions 138 and 182 and the National Action Plan developed last year provide a strong framework for addressing child labor in Uzbekistan. Participants agreed that finding ways to assist the GOU to implement these agreements is a better approach than demanding an assessment or acknowledgment of the problem. UNICEF Director Mahboob Shareef also suggested encouraging Uzbekistan to develop domestic legislation to address child labor. Apparently there is some legislation in the works associating criminal penalties with using child labor. Adoption of such legislation could be a gesture to the international community that Uzbekistan is taking the problem seriously. Criminal prosecutions would be a measurable indicator of the attention being paid to the problem, much like in the field of human trafficking. (Note: Although neither the international agreements nor domestic legislation address the systemic agricultural reform that will be necessary to eradicate child labor, their implementation could go far to reduce the number of children in the fields. End note.)

¶20. (U) A Presidential Statement: President Karimov has never made a public statement on this issue. Until he says that Uzbekistan will not tolerate child labor, local officials will have discretion in whether to utilize child labor, with some (like in the Ferghana valley) forbidding child labor, and others mobilizing school children and local government workers to work the fields. A presidential statement would clarify that the GOU truly opposes the use of child labor and forced labor in the cotton fields.

¶21. (SBU) High Level Delegations: The participants agreed that high level visits were a good opportunity to talk about child labor with officials. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon apparently is planning a trip to Uzbekistan in the coming year. If he does come to Tashkent, UNICEF and UNDP will encourage him to raise the issue of child labor. Ambassador Norland mentioned that the issue will remain on the agenda for any upcoming Washington visitors.

¶22. (U) Short-term Steps: UNICEF is updating the progress made on the National Action Plan (NAP), with the intention of offering assistance to the GOU in areas where progress is lacking. UNICEF Director Mahboob Shareef intends to call on First Deputy Prime Minister Azimov to take the lead, which will mean coordinating the efforts of the 23 agencies named in the NAP with responsibilities.

UNICEF will continue to take the lead on this issue, but encourages continued high level engagement by the international community. It will develop a proposal for suggested actions, and will keep the international community informed as it moves forward. The other members of the meeting pledged to support UNICEF's efforts.

Comment

¶23. (C) During the past year, great emphasis was placed on inviting the ILO to do an independent assessment of child labor in the cotton sector, in order to give a clear picture of the state of

TASHKENT 00001549 005 OF 005

child labor today. President Karimov bristled at the idea of an international organization coming in to "grade Uzbekistan like school pupils," however, and refused to extend such an invitation. While admittedly a setback, this does not mean an end to discussions with the GOU on the child labor issue. This meeting clearly showed that there are viable strategies for going forward, and the international community, led by UNICEF, showed its willingness to pursue such strategies.

¶24. (C) The GOU continues to bristle at any mention of a child labor problem in Uzbekistan, and would like to take the issue of child labor off the table as an agenda item during the proposed annual bilateral consultations. Addressing the issue in the context of agricultural reform, however, particularly by focusing on the economic impacts, remains a viable backdoor approach. In fact, targeting the economic factors that cause the problem will, in the long run, do more to effect real change than surveys or other efforts to bring scrutiny on Uzbekistan over this issue.

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